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ABSTRACT

An appreciation for the diverse meanings ascribed to the concept of literacy is fundamental to the affirmation of literacy in human lives. Literacy is something interpreted. Its presence is visible in lives, yet literacy remains an invisible, measureless phenomenon. In the fullness of being literate, there is humanness-wakefulness, liveliness and engagement. In reduced terms, literacy is a skill--specifically grammar--and misuse of the skill labels a speaker an illiterate. Social issues of class, economics and employment, expectations and aspirations, and power come to the fore in discussion of literacy. Judgments and comparisons are made about individuals with regard to literacy. A sense of hierarchy exists, and people are labeled and ranked in the social order based on assessments of literacy. Metaphorically, literacy is described as a battery and a tool for building personal growth. Images such as these suggest tangibility. They suggest literacy is something to get and to use. Issues of literacy are understood and acted upon through human perspectives. The meanings educators and the public attribute to literacy undergird teaching practice and touch on students' lives. (HOD)

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Literacy: A Reflection

by Karla Smart

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Literacy: A Reflection

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What is literacy? What does literacy mean in human lives? Approaching these philosophical questions one needs more than a dictionary. Lexical definition cannot fully answer questions of meaning--questions connected to culture, contexts and individual uniqueness. An appreciation for the diverse meanings ascribed to the concept of literacy is fundamental to the affirmation of the importance of literacy in human lives. Issues of literacy are understood and acted upon through human perspectives. The meanings educators and the public attribute to literacy undergird teaching practice and touch students' lives.

Language is highly connotative. Owen Barfield (1967) distinguishes the denotative quality of language, the "'dictionary meanings' or 'lexical' meanings of words," from the connotative quality which he terms "speaker's meaning" (p. 27). Clusters of ideas, feelings, impressions, recollections and associations form around individual words. A word means in different ways to different people. A word means in different ways in differing contexts.

The sources for the description of literacy I present are the images, associations, stories and metaphors in the language my colleagues use when thinking and talking about literacy. The process giving me access to what Barfield terms speaker's meaning around the word literacy is known as "Reflection" and was developed by Patricia Carini, Chair for Research and Advanced Studies at the Prospect Archive and Center for Education and Research in North Bennington, Vermont. Cecelia Traugh (1985) offers a description of the Reflection process:

> *As an activity, a Reflection is deceptively simple. People are asked to think about and write down the meanings, images, and conditions surrounding their use of a word or phrase. The results of the process are less easily described. What people write in a reflection is more than "what they think" in the conventional sense. What they write, and then share orally, includes associations, images, metaphors, and feelings. There are few logical definitions or explanations. Each reflection varies from person to person, but they typically take on a non-discursive or non-expository form. As individuals share their thoughts about the word in question, patterns emerge. The patterns, with their collective base, form beginning points for understanding larger, cultural and social meanings, or what some social scientists term, intersubjective meanings. Beginning patterns become a base for further study, describing themes, contrasts, and ideas of potential importance (pp. 81-82).*

Two groups participated in Reflection on literacy, members of the 14th Prospect Seminar Institute II (sponsored by the Prospect Center, North Bennington, Vermont) and members of the Naturalistic Inquiry Seminar (sponsored by the Center for Teaching and Learning at the University of North Dakota). Twenty-four people contributed reflections. The participants are elementary, secondary and university educators; school and university administrators; and graduate students in education. Some

are parents of preschool, elementary, secondary or college students. Nearly half of the participants are language arts teachers or teacher-educators in language arts and/or English.

Lists of words, phrases and brief narrations of experience form the "data" collected from these reflections. As an example of the ideas gathered, and as basis for further understanding of the Reflection process, I cite below the reflection completed by Betsy Wice, a reading teacher in the Philadelphia public schools:

Literacy

1st grade reading level--key signs, functional literacy
--"men, women"
pictures do it anyway lately
--international sign code

4th-5th grade reading level--you can read the Daily News
6th-7th grade reading level--Phila. Inquirer, some of New York Times

Laubach Literacy program--"each one teach one"--empower, spread the power
Freire (Brazil)--phonic + social-revolutionary

Driver manual for Pennsylvania--pass 20 q. test (multiple choice)
Mike memorized all the answers
Mike couldn't read maps

↑ literacy ?→ ↓ juvenile delinquency
extrinsic reason for improving schools

computer literate--know which buttons to push

illiterate handwriting--"He signs his checks with X's but they cash them just the same."

"non-literate" politer than "illiterate"

reading specialist certificate--my responsibility for all these Philadelphia non-literates
--the "illiterate" teacher (can mean student doesn't match subject with verb "He have an apple" "She don't work hard")

oral epic--non-literate 19 yr. old recreating his poems
--blind Homer
--Serbo Croatian epics--
Prof. Alfred Lord

"Even to get a job as a garbage man these days you have to be able to read." (minimal)

rude, unlettered--"J-O JOE" (Great Expectations)

menu--"What do you recommend?"
privacy of homes for teaching adults

60 yr. old Mr. A's friend learned to read Bible

Protestant Revolution--each man read his own Bible

connection

cut-off

Emerging from the twenty-four reflections are themes, images and questions. There is often opposition or contrast, as, for example, with Betsy Wice's observations that literacy has to do with both "connection" and "cut-off." The description my essay enfolds is of a body of thought educators generated around the idea of literacy and the meaning of literacy in human lives.

How do we describe what literacy is? How does literacy move in human lives? What does it move us

toward? Literacy is something interpreted. Its presence is visible in lives, yet literacy remains an invisible, measureless phenomenon. It is described as an enabling, as more than reading and writing. Literacy both requires and facilitates change. It is a becoming. It is ongoing. Literacy opens possibilities, gives access, enhances, enriches and refines. Confidence is associated with literacy. Awakening to and nourishing one's spiritual inner life is associated with literacy (spiritual though not necessarily theological). Metaphors of movement and release are used to describe literacy as a step, a pathway, a key and a password. Literacy moves one toward a higher and finer place, toward art, music and literature (particularly toward the classics) and toward the cultured in cuisine and decorating and fashion tastes. A multifaceted, richly textured life is attributed to literacy, though that life may be experienced vicariously. Literacy is a mode of communication, a uniquely human process. It is described as a contribution. A literate person, through ideas, work and tastes, contributes to the social whole. Literacy provides a link to history and to memory, bringing the voices of the past into the present. Literacy is also described as a cutting off. It can bring separation of self from previous self, of self from family and of self from native culture. For immigrants learning a new language, acquiring literacy can be linked to separation from cultural foundations such as religious ceremony, dress, foods, music and dance and creative expression.

How do we speak of literacy? How is the word used? What connotations and assumptions are held around literacy and being literate? We speak of degrees of literacy and use the concept of degree to rank individuals. A continuum can be drawn ranging from the illiterate, to the functionally literate, to the literate, lettered and literary. In the fullness of <u>being</u> literate there is humanness--wakefulness, liveliness and engagement. In reduced terms literacy is a skill, specifically grammar, and misuse of the skill labels a speaker an illiterate. To the far right of the continuum is the assumption of never endingness, of continued breadth and depth of literacy. To the far left of the continuum is the assumption of never having begun, of struggle to gain literacy or lack of initiative to strive. We speak of literacy with regard and respect. The idea of literacy assumes potential and ability. We speak of illiteracy pejoratively, often as though to be without reading and writing is to comprehend nothing and to know nothing. Illiteracy is described as a problem to be solved. The idea of illiteracy focuses on inability, on what cannot be done. At one end of the continuum, literacy is made manifest through highly conscious living. At the other, literacy is an activity of decoding and is made manifest through attainment of functional rank on standardized tests or through job placement. We speak of a bottom line and minimum competencies. We shape phrases creating new kinds of literacies: computer literacy, video literacy, musical literacy, innocence-abroad-tourist literacy. Literacy is spoken of as something people do--process, event, activity. We speak of using or realizing literacy in different ways for different purposes.

Literacy is spoken of as thought. To be literate is to be able to make sense of print and ideas. It is to be able to express one's self in a way that allows others to comprehend. Literacy permits a locating and holding of thought on the written page. Through writing,

thought is given body. Being unable to write is viewed as being without access to whatever one knows. When thinking is described as a skill or component of literacy, it is most often referred to as critical thinking, reflective thinking or reasoning. Less often are speculation, imagination and creativity described as thought processes and related to literacy. To deny literacy is to stifle thought.

Views and images of persons are held: the literate and the non-literate. (Non-literate is a term considered somewhat more polite than the term illiterate.) The literate is viewed as schooled or educated, as having acquaintance or familiarity with literature, as lettered, as conversant and fluent, and as capable in the world. An athlete is lettered for prowess in sports. A person is viewed as lettered in the realm of literacy because of what he or she reads or exposes him or herself to. Reading the New Yorker magazine, for example, connotes a certain lettered sophistication. Attending the cinema to view foreign films connotes a visual letteredness that going to Hollywood movies does not. To be literate is to be free, independent and facing opportunity. Being literate is described as being conscious, appreciative and respectful of language, one's own and other languages. To be literate is to be in the presence of strings of words, etymologies and meanings. Language play and invention are associated with being literate. Abstract, stuffy use of language is associated with being lettered. To be literate implies flexibility and range in using language concretely, abstractly and symbolically.

The illiterate is viewed as dumb, defective, vulnerable and readily to be taken advantage of, rude or unpolished, as holding lesser values, as without knowledge or access to what he or she knows, unable to maneuver in or manipulate his or her environment and as shamed. A person without literacy is viewed as isolated and alone, as troubled, as deprived and as needing to protect the great, heavy secret that he or she cannot read and write. A person easily says, "I cannot swim." The words "I cannot read" are spoken only to the trusted few. To be illiterate is to be trapped, dead-ended, dependent and viewed with contempt. The loss of literacy, through physical accident, illness or aging, can bring the same emotional pain and burden of shame that illiteracy does. Causes for illiteracy are sought, and blame is placed on the non-literate person, or his or her family, neighborhood, schools and teachers.

In literature, for example Dickens' Great Expectations and Twain's Huckleberry Finn, there are portraits of characters who lack "book larnin'" (and, generally, wealth) but who are warm and caring, trustworthy, capable, spiritual and fully alive. In circles of American literary criticism, poles reminiscent of the illiterate-to-lettered continuum stake boundaries between paleface writers (such as Edith Wharton and T. S. Eliot) and redskin writers (such as Mark Twain and William Carlos Williams). The style and content of paleface writers is described as aristocratic and contained whereas the work of redskin writers is described as untamed and fleshy.

Social issues of class, economics and employment, expectations and aspirations and power come to the fore in discussion of literacy. Judgments and comparisons are made about individuals with regard to literacy. A sense of hierarchy exists, and people are labeled and ranked in the social order based on assessments of literacy. Particular

fields and types of employment are described as requiring persons of high literacy, persons of minimum or functional literacy and requiring employees with no literacy skills whatsoever. Expectations about one's contribution to society, one's likely educational future and one's human dignity and worth are formed in relation to literacy. Political careers and political power are in the hands of the literate. Class distinction brings distrust of the educated and resentment of the privileges in health and welfare, economics and cultural regard of the highly literate. Equally, there is distrust of the non-literate and resentment of social responsibility and provisioning for aid.

Historically, access to literacy has had to do with social environment, gender and distinction of class. The aristocracy and the powerful learned to read and write. Men read before women, women read to children and women wrote with male pen names in order to assure publication. Slaves were kept from literacy, unless, as in American history, some were secretly-taught or self-taught readers and writers. Some monks, scribes and clerks copied letters--were they considered literate? Romantics viewed the unlettered and unschooled as innocents. They described the non-literate as pure, untainted and natural, as noble savages. Embarrassment and the belief that non-readers and non-writers are somehow lesser persons come considerably later in history.

A culture loses particular skills, abilities and capacities at the moment it gains reading and writing. Memory, storytelling, song, drama and art undergo change when a culture comes to literacy. Without literacy, cultures relied upon oral and pictoral arts, held in high regard, practiced with style and skill, to chronicle and record a people.

Literacy is connected to issues of power. How literacy is taught, by and to whom, for what purposes and goals and how it is assessed are each political issues. Literacy is described as unique, contextual and subject to change--qualities overlooked by quotients, the concept of failure and bald descriptors such as the term illiterate. However, descriptors and quotients assigned to a person's literacy locate or position him or her. Schools track students. The military selects officers and enlisted people. Expectations for lives are shaped consciously and unconsciously based on perceptions of persons' present and potential literacy.

Aims and purposes guide the literate in their teaching of the non-literate or less literate. To have access to literacy programs, or to schools, is not necessarily to gain one's own authentic voice. A goal of the protestant revolution was that each man would be able to read his own Bible. In the mission fields, a goal is to bring the people to the Bible and, "each one teach one" is the slogan. As with religiously organized literacy programs politically sponsored literacy campaigns come complete with their own literature. Children were used to teach parents to read the propaganda of socialist and communist revolutions. Democracy is described as dependent upon a literate public for preservation. Voter registration drives are often coupled with reading programs. Short-lived relationship between teacher and learners and tightly contoured purpose for facilitating or enhancing literacy are qualities in these experiences.

Literacy is described as empowering. It can give physical shape to our own voices so that we can see them on a page in front of us. It can facilitate voice, thought and

dialogue between persons. Literacy can root a person to his or her senses, heightening powers of observation, thereby supporting seeing, hearing, feeling, thinking and believing. Often, in the name of literacy, learners are taught the skills, knowledge and voices of others. They are not necessarily permitted or enabled to gain their own voice or to experience dialogical communication. Isolated skills, such as ability to spell words, familiarity with phonics, dictionary usage and the ability to print or write cursively, are viewed as survival skills to be learned in school and applied on the job.

Metaphorically, literacy is described as a battery and a tool for building personal growth. Images such as these suggest thingness. They suggest literacy is something to get and to use. Literacy is described as a pilot light, suggesting the sparking or fueling of a larger force, suggesting an eternal flame, suggesting a constancy unlike the on/off quality of a battery. Metaphorical descriptions suggest literacy is a stream or river on which to travel and a doorway through which to pass. Movement and progression are suggested by these images. Literacy is described as a third eye, something with moreness, something personal (literally physical to the person), something human in a way batteries or flames are not.

Present in my essay is the collective voice of twenty-four educators describing meanings and associations around the word literacy. I believe, as do socio-psycholinguists, that readers bring individual and cultural experience to text, taking and making meaning. It is for each reader to bring voice and meanings to this description. The more deeply plummed our beliefs about and visions for literacy--our meanings--the more clear and wide our base for action. What do we believe individually? What do we believe intersubjectively? Where do we question? What do we hope? What are our expectations? What do we examine? What do we sense? What is our practice? What is the essence of literacy in our own lives and in the lives of our students?

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